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Avital's poignant plea

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The chronology Avital Scharansky hands out is but a barebones account of the persecution her husband Anatoly has suffered at the hands of the thugs in the Kremlin and does not reflect the deep sorrow and worry one sees in the beautiful, dark eyes of this courageous man's courageous wife. It reads:

1973 — Anatoly applies for an exit visa from the Soviet Union; half a year later, he receives a refusal with no explanation.

4 July 1974 — Marriage of Anatoly to Avital.

5 July 1974 — Anatoly is separated from his wife, Avital, who is leaving for Israel. Authorities promise that within six months, Anatoly will be given a visa and be reunited with his wife.

1975 — Anatoly becomes a member of the Helsinki Monitoring Group in Moscow in order to observe the rights of Jews to free immigration, according to the Helsinki Agreements, which the U.S.S.R. signed in the same year with 35 other nations.

1976 — Intensive persecution after Anatoly appears in a Soviet TV

documentary, "Zionist Soldiers Dangerous to the Public."

5 March 1977 — An article published in Izvestiya accusing seven Jewish refuseniks, Anatoly among them, of spying for the CIA.

15 March 1977 — After constantly being followed, Anatoly is kidnapped by the KGB and disappears.

10 July 1978 — Anatoly's so-called trial begins; he is accused of spying for the CIA. Intensive protest around the world.

14 July 1978 — The trial ends. Anatoly is sentenced to 13 years, although his only "crime" is his desire to be reunited with his wife, his nation, and his land. Anatoly does not receive legal defense. His last words at the trial are: "Next year in Jerusalem."

1978 — Anatoly in Vladimir prison.

1979 — Chistopol Prison.

Spring 1980 — Anatoly is transported to Camp 35, near the town of Perm.

Autumn 1981 — After sitting for

135 days in solitary confinement, an internal trial sentences Anatoly to go back to prison.

27 September 1982 — Anatoly begins a hunger strike in protest of his isolation from his family. A wave of protests around the world.

14 January 1983 — Anatoly stops his hunger strike after the Soviets permit his mother to receive a letter from him. His state of health is bad. Although he suffers from a heart defect, and weighs 39 kgs., the Soviets do not give him any medical treatment.

13 November 1984 — Anatoly returns to Camp 35.

14 and 15 January 1985 — Anatoly meets with his mother and brother for 48 hours.

March 1985 — His mother receives a telegram from camp authorities informing her that all remaining visits for 1985 are canceled and all letters are confiscated.

April 1985 — Again, contact is cut.

Oh, how precious freedom is and how little we appreciate it.

In a letter to his "Dear Loved Ones," describing what it was like to see his brother and his mother, Anatoly compares this brief visit to the "bends," the illness suffered by deep-sea divers when they rise too

quickly from the depths of the sea to the surface. He writes:

"First, I saw Leonid, and then I saw Mama, who has really aged. I heard their first words, and immediately — not only with my ears and eyes, but with all my blood — I began to take in the air that you breathe in, there on the outside.

"Following this, for several days, I returned to my routine pattern of life. The images that I had of our meeting chaotically blended together within myself, like facts about the outside world which one can read about in a letter or a newspaper."

Noting that in this visit he chose each question carefully lest he waste valuable and limited time, Anatoly quotes from one of the Psalms:

"I said:

'I will take heed to my ways,

That I sin not with my tongue;

I will keep a curb upon my mouth,

While the wicked is before me.'

I was dumb with silence, I held my peace,

Had no comfort,
And pain was held in check."

Somehow, Avital knows that since last year her beloved Anatoly has been transferred from Chistopol prison to a work camp where he has been sentenced to serve four months in this camp's inner prison under "the most severe conditions." And in his latest letter she says he says "that he suffers continued pain in his eyes and chest and fears that in the autumn he will be transferred back from this work camp to Chistopol prison."

And this is why Avital Scharansky wants to meet with President Reagan before his meeting with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev: to, as she put it in an exclusive open letter to Mr. Reagan in this newspaper, "explain in greater detail the steps being taken by the Soviet leadership to aggravate the plight of Jewry and specifically my husband." As she put it in this open letter:

"If Mr. Gorbachev is concerned with improving his public image, a more basic change is needed. A face-lift is not enough. A new heart must be installed in a political body whose human heart stopped beating decades ago and whose vital organs have reached the advanced stages of atrophy characterized by an unfeeling bureaucracy and a police state."

Invoking the vision of America expressed by the writers of our Declaration of Independence and the framers of our Constitution, Avital pleads:

"Mr. Gorbachev must emerge from his meetings with you, Mr. President, with the knowledge that the release of prisoners of Zion in the Soviet Union, and the free emigration of Soviet Jewry, are a prerequisite to the creation of that atmosphere of trust within which real progress on concrete issues can be achieved."

Amen, and amen, Avital. I pray you see this woman, Mr. President.

And I — and I am sure millions of other Americans — also pray that you, Avital, will see Anatoly, not next year in Jerusalem, but this year.

John Lofton is a staff columnist for The Washington Times.